"The Lighted School House"

January 11, 1944.

The lighted school house--that is the term applied to school plants all over the continent which are opening their doors each evening to adults. Those opening doors are in response to a need felt by hundreds of thousands. People, whose ages range from twenty to over sixty are demanding an opportunity to continue their learning. There are so many things they want to know--economics, psychology, history, literature, handicrafts--to name only a few. And where classes have been organized for these oldsters, one finds an enthusiasm and an interest in learning which is unforgettable. I can remember vividly my first experience. The date was November 1939. Dr. H. D. Southam, professor of Education at McGill University asked me whether I wished to accompany him on his regular weekly trip to the adult education school at Lennoxville in Quebec's eastern townships. His invitation startled me. "Do you mean", I asked, "that you travel one hundred miles from Montreal to Lennoxville each week?" "Yes," he replied, "and it's well worth it. That's one of the most exciting experiments I've encountered. They are developing leaders from among the most ambitious adults in the area. Lennoxville is only one of five community schools which have been organized to train people who are convinced education should end at eighty instead of eighteen."

Well, we left Montreal that Thursday afternoon in November. We rode in an automobile which someone interested in adult education had gladly supplied. Seated beside me was a graduate student in genetics whose hobby was dramatics. There was enough vitality and zeal in his dramatics class at Lennoxville to make him feel that a 200-mile return trip was well worth the effort. There was a young woman social worker who lectured on sociology. In the same car, too, we had an authority on housing and an art teacher. We reached Lennoxville in time for

dinner and I can remember that meal well. Alex Sim was our host. He was a pleasant, unassuming fellow who had begun his work of adult education the year before with a small grant from the Carnegie Foundation and a boundless enthusiasm for his work. He was convinced that the people throughout that area were eager to follow a consistent, systematic course of study if it were properly presented to them. Alex Sim told us at that dinner he was sure the number of community schools dedicated to adult learning would steadily grow. Just last week I heard from him. His report of achievement was so remarkable I involuntarily blinked as I read the statistics. There were five community schools in 1938. Today, five years later, there are 83. Those figures tell more than any amount of glowing adjectives.

The instructors who sat around the tables that evening were not all professional teachers. There were some, of course, but there were others--lawyers, doctors and craftsmen from Lennoxville who knew a subject well and who could communicate their learning to others. I can remember, too, a young lecturer from McGill who was making a circuit of those community schools talking about his favorite subject, social security. He was unknown, then, a fellow who was plugging away at his thesis for the Doctor of Philosophy degree. It never occurred to me then that Leonard Marsh would be such an important name in Canada.

We all went to the High School at 7:30. It was ablaze with light. Every time I go past the schools of Edmonton or Calgary now and see them as dark masses against the sky I remember that school. It all comes back to me--the scores of people getting ready for their first class... the youngsters in their early twenties and the white-haired men and women in their sixties...all there for the same purpose: to learn more about the things which interested them. You could almost feel their ardor. The corridors were crowded as the starting hour

approached, quite unlike the dark, silent halls of our schools tonight. Then the bell rang. Adult students began to file into the various rooms. They represented every trade and profession, every level of society. In one room the subject was public speaking; in another it was dramatics, or sociology or glove-making or history. If ever one saw earnest students, here they were. After all, they were attending this classroom voluntarily; no laws of the land compelled their presence. And their earnestness showed clearly in their undivided attention and in the questions they asked.

After an hour of lecture and discussion came the bell and recess. The rooms emptied in a moment as the pupils rushed for the auditorium. For a few minutes there was folk-dancing, gay, spirited and lively. Then the lights blinked; the auditorium became dark. A stirring documentary film followed, its subject housing. Immediately after, the authority on housing led the discussion on this topic. It was an excellent session, as I remember it, with people of every political and economic faith participating.

Then the bell rang again, and adult students filed back to the classrooms for another period of study. At 10:30 that evening the lights went out in Lennoxville High School. Students returned to their homes. Some had a few blocks to go; others travelled miles. But distance made no difference. All through the months of that winter and every winter since, adults have been going to the high school continuing their education and finding a new zest in life.

What has been done in the Eastern Townships of Quebec can certainly be done in Alberta. There is the same enthusiasm for knowledge here; there are school buildings too which can and ought to be used for instructing adults. As you pass by these buildings, has it ever occurred to you that they are public investments paid for by our citizens?

Then why should we close them at four each afternoon, to stand idly during the evenings when they could be housing animated groups of adult students? In our present scheme of things, education ends for most people at eighteen years of age. Up until eighteen the resources of the state are employed to give instruction to every boy and girl. We count this instruction as a most valuable investment, and it is. The more educated our young people, the more they can give to the nation as a whole. But somehow we seem to develop a blind-spot in our thinking when we think of those beyond eighteen. We offer them no opportunities for further learning; in fact we close the school in their faces at the very time when they might be learning, namely, in the evening. We have another institution for public learning--the library. How absurd it would be to lock our library each afternoon at four! Yet we follow that procedure for our schools.

What is the reason for this obvious lack of logic? Are our citizens opposed? You know they are not. The answer is probably that few people have given the matter real thought up until now. When they do, the doors of our schools will be opened, and the lighted schoolhouse will be a common sight in this province. Professor Clement Thompson questioned hundreds of school boards throughout the United States on their attitude toward the lighted school. Here is his conclusion recorded in the periodical, School and Society:

"Although adult education is as old as man, as a more or less organized social force, it is a late comer in our midst. Public-school officials need only to be shown the way and given some help; we may then anticipate an expanded program at the adult level. Adults pay taxes used in the construction and maintenance of the buildings. When the children are not using the space, the adults should be using it. We have the space. What are we going to do in it?"

have all held forth on their favorite topics. One of the most popular programs, in fact, was a religious discussion conducted panel style by a Catholic priest, a Jewish rabbi and a Protestant minister.

Marengo is not the only Iowa town to boast one of these co-operative adult-education projects. It happens to be the largest of a dozen such enterprises in the state. Marengo can boast of having found a working democracy in its lighted school house.

And then there is San Jose, California. Twelve years ago Director David L. MacKaye began adult education in that city. Today, more than one-third of all the pupils in San Jose's schools are adults who have found happiness in the pursuit of knowledge. The program is rated A-1 by experts with the reason not hard to find. For one thing, adult education is not treated as an extra. It is an independent department under the board of education. Another thing, Director MacKaye and his assistants have modernized adult education and have made the courses absorbing. They have not hesitated at tackling novel ideas. Their proudest achievement is the social-civic discussion centre and I would like to quote this brief description from the handbook MacKaye has issued: "The social-civic discussion group," it says, "deals with the current world: its wars, political problems, social problems, death and taxes, and whatever else bothers it--and with some things which are a joy to it. The discussions are arranged in friendly, informal groups. A leader devotes his time and energy to the collection of as many facts as may be available from the most important and authoritative sources. These discussions are arranged and conducted to supply light and not heat.... Egotists, shallow persons and cranks do not attend these discussion-groups for they feel out of place. Intelligent citizens to whom the world and its welfare are important, those who like fair dealing and sincerity and those who deal fairly and are sincere, do

attend these groups. During the past ten years they have been important influences in San Jose."

San Jose also has an elaborate educational set-up for educating its recent immigrants of Mexican, Italian or Portuguese origin. There is provision, too, for the men and women who return to school to appease an intellectual curiosity. They study modern books, social orientation, psychology, or take courses in art, music, history and politics. Adult education is not a fad in this city; it is not for a small group who consider themselves select. Actually, over 15% of all the adults in San Jose are enrolled in these lighted school houses.

Alberta has still to make a start in this direction. Once the movement begins though, it will advance most readily. I can tell that by the number of questions and letters which are addressed to me. People are eager to know the programs of the Alberta Adult Education Association; they want to know whether it can be started in their own community. For this year the Association has chosen twelve centres in the province for active organization. In each one, prominent citizens will seek to establish a form of adult education. Every community will develop a pattern suitable to its own desires and needs. There is the example of Lennoxville, Quebec, Marengo, Iowa or San Jose, California. Each offers ideas and suggestions which may be adapted to the specific requirements of an Alberta community.

Adult education is the great ally of democracy. Rule by the people can have meaning only so long as the people are informed. In this complex age of ours a person only begins to be educated by the time he is eighteen--and then his formal schooling ends. We cannot permit the many years of adulthood to be lacking in any consistent learning. Therein lies the absurdity of choking off education at eighteen years of age or at 4 o'clock in the afternoon.

The years ahead are years of great promise. Magazines and books are filled with pictures of the glories of the post-war world. But an age of social advance and economic plenty will never come to us until man begins to understand the world in which he lives. The road ahead is a difficult one. It will require much reading and much study by the man in the street; he will find great need for intelligent discussion. Fortunately educational pioneers have shown the way. They have indicated clearly enough that adult education offers one of the best means of achieving the informed citizen, keystone of efficient democracy. That is why we must begin to open our schools for evening classes. We must harness the creative energy which is in every schoolroom. Alberta will go far forward in the next year if it decides that schools are for all the people, and that school hours end not at four in the afternoon. It is sober fact, not oratory, to say that one of the great hopes for a better tomorrow is the lighted schoolhouse.